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E.O. 12958: DECL: 09/18/2019

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SUBJECT: ALCOHOL IN ANKARA: MAYOR MIXES A MOLOTOV COCKTAIL

REF: ANKARA 1104

Classified By: POL Counselor Daniel O'Grady, for reasons 1.4 (b,d)

11. (U) SUMMARY: Ankara Mayor Melih Gokcek briefly flirted with the idea of holding a referendum on the sale of alcohol in Bahcelievler district of Ankara. Although the idea was shelved after a blizzard of protests, the concept of the referendum and the way the mayor brought the issue to the agenda underscores yet again the polarization of politics in Turkey. END SUMMARY.

12. (U) Bahcelievler neighborhood lies in the shadow of Ataturk's mausoleum and, fittingly, is one of the bastions of secularism in Ankara. It is a residential and commercial district; many of the residents are professors and staff at nearby Ankara and Hacettepe Universities. Its shops, restaurants, and bars provide a lively nightlife for those universities, and -- because it is easily accessible by metro -- to students from Middle East Technical University and Bilkent University. Bahcelievler's votes bolster the commanding position the opposition Republican People's Party (CHP) holds in Cankaya subprovince.

13. (U) Cankaya Mayor Bulent Tanik, a city planner by profession, and Interior Minister Besir Atalay (who lives in Bahcelievler) jointly petitioned Greater Municipal Mayor Melih Gokcek to close Askaabat Avenue (also known as Seventh Avenue) to motor traffic, claiming that the heavy pedestrian traffic attracted to the commercial establishments there should require the street to be made an exclusive pedestrian zone. Gokcek brought a proposal to the Metropolitan Municipal Assembly on September 8 which would bring the issue to a local referendum. However, he added to the proposal a clause that would add a decision on banning the sale of alcohol in the same referendum. The proposal passed the Assembly unanimously, but afterwards, the opposition parties -- led by the CHP -- called foul, claiming they did not realize what it was exactly they were voting on. Greater Municipal Mayor Melih Gokcek defended the proposal, arguing that it was put forward in response to complaints by neighborhood residents against drunken revelers late at night. He also emphasized that referenda of this sort -- including the one to close Askaabat -- are for information only, and therefore would not be binding.

14. (C) Despite Gokcek's defense, the alcohol referendum

became "proof" in secularists' minds that the AKP in general, and Gokcek in particular, are trying to further an agenda of implementing conservative laws in line with Islamic principles under the guise of democratic initiatives. Our CHP contacts have started to refer to the surreptitious way in which Gokcek added alcohol to the agenda as "fascism," and one even saw fit to remind us that "democracy brought Hitler to power." In the face of high-pitched pressure from the opposition and the press, Gokcek agreed to remove alcohol from the referendum.

15. (C) COMMENT: Alcohol sales may be safe in Bahcelievler, but distrust and bitter rhetoric have ratcheted up tensions yet another notch in Ankara. Although Mayor Gokcek has been a polarizing figure in Ankara politics for years, this incident shows how mistrust among the parties can turn a mishandled issue into a sensationalized incident. The way AKP brought alcohol onto the agenda was certainly clumsy, but CHP's alarmist clamor amplified the issue -- underscoring yet again the current divide in Turkish society.

JEFFREY

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